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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 000182

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FM SALLOUKH WELCOMES AMBASSADOR SISON

REF: BEIRUT 00080

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Ambassador Sison made introductory protocol calls on MFA Chief of Protocol Georges Siam and then FM Fawzi Salloukh on February 6. Salloukh said that the Ambassador, although officially a Charge d'Affaires, would be considered as a "full-fledged Ambassador, with all the rights and privileges associated with that position." Ambassador conveyed Washington's strong bipartisan support for Lebanon and stated the USG's desire for the Lebanese presidential election to occur at the earliest possible date. Salloukh said he welcomed the return of Arab League SYG Amr Moussa to Lebanon on February 7 and he hoped the USG would come out in support of the Arab League Initiative (ALI). As expected, Salloukh favored the opposition's interpretation of the Initiative: simultaneous election of a president and formation of a cabinet. End Summary.

Cordial Reception

¶2. (C) Ambassador was warmly received during her courtesy calls at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. U.S Embassy contact with the Foreign Minister has been limited since Salloukh joined other Shia ministers who resigned from the Siniora government in November 2006. (reftel). Former Ambassador Feltman's farewell call on January 19 was his first official meeting with the Foreign Minister in more than one year.

¶3. (C) Protocol chief Ambassador Siam mentioned that Ambassador Sison joins 15 other Charges d'Affaires who await agreement from the Government of Lebanon. Characterizing the situation as "complex," he and the Foreign Minister both assured Ambassador that she would be considered an Ambassador, with all of the rights and privileges, until she formally becomes the U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon. Both indicated a wish to continue consultations with the Ambassador in the future. (We do not expect to. Since the resignation of the Shia ministers, we routinely deal with Tariq Mitri, the Minister of Culture and Siniora ally who was named Acting Foreign Minister.)

Requesting USG Public Support for the Arab League Initiative and Salloukh's Interpretation

¶4. (C) Turning to politics, Salloukh said he was pleased that SYG Moussa was returning to Lebanon on February 7 to "continue his good offices." He expects Moussa to stay for 3-4 days. Salloukh urged that the USG publicly support the ALI, noting public statements of support for the ALI from France, the EU Troika and other European countries. "Your public presence will support us on these efforts."

¶5. (C) Discussing his interpretation of the ALI, Salloukh argued that some thought if LAF Commander General Michel Sleiman was elected and then had to face the difficult process of selecting a cabinet, it would cause a crisis and weaken both the office of the president and Sleiman personally. The better solution, according to Salloukh, would be to reach decision on a new president and division of the cabinet together, and for a new president and a new cabinet to come to power at the same time, thus ensuring a strong start for the new government. When asked which interpretation SYG Moussa supported, Salloukh said he did not know and he agreed with the need for Moussa to resolve this ambiguity.

¶6. (C) Ambassador stated that the USG strongly urges the end to the current political vacuum, which is having negative political, economic and social ramifications. She said that Lebanese citizens are looking for an end to the crisis. Salloukh and Siam both pushed harder, saying "We need your support (for the ALI). Your silence is being interpreted negatively in light of the EU and French public statements of support."

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Other International Issues

¶7. (C) While comparing notes with Ambassador on their diplomatic experiences in Africa, the FM mentioned that Chad is one of the few African nations without a Lebanese expatriate community. Salloukh said they had approached "their mother country" for assistance and France agreed to allow some 15 Lebanese citizens to join the evacuation of French citizens.

¶8. (C) Salloukh outlined the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the Lebanese people. He was particularly dismayed that recent speeches by President Bush did not guarantee Palestinians the "right of return" to their homeland. According to Salloukh, Palestinians residing in Lebanon since 1948 will never be naturalized. "It is against our constitution and the will of the Lebanese people," he said. He hopes that momentum can be maintained after the Annapolis conference to address this and other contentious issues.

¶9. (C) Finally, Salloukh said he would like to continue a dialogue with the Ambassador on UN Resolution 1701. "The Lebanese are in compliance with the resolution's requirements, but the Israelis violate it continually with their illegal overflights."

Comment

¶10. (C) Salloukh was gracious in welcoming the Ambassador. Our consultations with March 14th leaders prior to her arrival proved correct in predicting that this call on the technically resigned minister would be well-received and a sign of professional courtesy for the protocol-conscious Foreign Minister and his staff. Ambassador calls on Acting FM Mitri on February 8. End Comment.
SISON